

Isaiah 50:4-9 (NIV) ⁴ The Sovereign LORD has given me an instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being taught. ⁵ The Sovereign LORD has opened my ears, and I have not been rebellious; I have not drawn back. ⁶ I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting. ⁷ Because the Sovereign LORD helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore have I set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame. ⁸ He who vindicates me is near. Who then will bring charges against me? Let us face each other! Who is my accuser? Let him confront me! ⁹ It is the Sovereign LORD who helps me. Who is he that will condemn me? They will all wear out like a garment; the moths will eat them up.

Mark 8:27-38 (NIV) ²⁷ Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?" ²⁸ They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." ²⁹ "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Christ." ³⁰ Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him. ³¹ He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. ³² He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." ³⁴ Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. ³⁶ What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? ³⁷ Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? ³⁸ If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

“An Instructed Tongue”

This past week American President Obama gave his back-to-school address to American youth. He boldly told them not to check out on their education because it is not only checking out on yourself, but also on your country. Youth are the future of a nation; the ones who will find the solutions for today's apparently unsolvable problems. An education is crucial. It is essential to the beneficial continuation of private and public life. Governments and parents can work to make sure that school systems are the very best, but if the students back out on their responsibility to get an education, everyone will suffer for it.

I listened to that speech earlier this week looking for fodder for the Rally Day sermon. Unlike President Obama, I will not focus this sermon on our young people telling them not to check out on Sunday School because those that are here seem rather happy to come to church and to go to Sunday School. I think this willingness indicates that we must be doing something right. So, maybe it is more appropriate that I tell us, the adults of the congregation, not to check out on our responsibility to educate ourselves in the Christian faith. This congregation can and does offer quality education events for both youth and adults, but if we, the adults, don't take the responsibility for our participation in these events and also our own personal devotional lives at home, we are not only checking out on ourselves but Scripture indicates we also cause our congregation to suffer.

Here at Claude Christian education happens by various means. The worship service is a time for education, a time when we grow closer to God and one another, a time when we grow in knowledge of our faith, a time in which we are changed by grace. Sunday School is also. Private and family devotions at home are also moments of education. Bible

Study, Men's Pub Night, Women's Fellowship, and the Book Club are also obvious times for education. When we do outreach such as providing Sunday dinner at Evangel Hall, we are also being educated in Christ. Even Fellowship dinners are education events. Participation in these events benefits not only ourselves but also serves to build up the whole congregation in Christ. To forgo them is not only a neglect of ourselves, it also weakens and stunts the growth of the congregation.

This probably sounds strange to our ears because in Western culture we don't have a very strong concept of "we". We believe that faith is a private matter and therefore what I as an individual believer do or don't do with respect to my private faith has no bearing on the rest of the church. But, if we exercise our responsibility to read and study the Bible, we find in passages like Ephesians 4 and 1 Corinthians 12 and 14 that the church is a living body. It lives and grows and even dies. It can be healthy and it can be sick. The individual members of the body must grow together or the body becomes malformed and weakened.

If the heart grows and the chest cavity does not, then the heart suffers congestion and fails. So it goes with a church, if its relational love grows and deepens but those whom God has gifted with gifts in organizational structuring and outreach have checked out, it causes the church to be unable to change to let the love within it grow to include others. If the brain grows and the skull does not, the brain compresses and fails. So also, a church may grow in knowledge but if those whom God has gifted to help the church put that knowledge into action have checked out, personal knowledge of Christ simply becomes knowing things about him. If the legs grow and the arms do not, you have a malformed body that's impressively tall, but it has no reach. So also a church may have a solid foundation of a building, many members, programs, a fair endowment, but, if the people that God has gifted in the congregation with gifts of vision and discernment have checked out, the church will find itself lacking in aspiration to be all that Christ would have it to be or just too afraid to take a risk. Need I say what a church looks like whose mouth has grown disproportionately big, because those whom God has gifted to look after the brain have checked out. If we as individual believers are not aware of our giftedness for ministry or have just plain checked out, the whole church, not just ourselves, suffers.

Let's turn back to the topic of education in the church. Education in the first place is a simple, natural process. It involves teachers who learn and learners who teach. The Suffering Servant in Isaiah 50:4 said, "The Sovereign LORD has given me an instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being taught." Paul says a similar thing in 2 Corinthians 1:3,4, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God." The heart of education in a church is our sharing our devotional lives with one another. The words that God speaks to us in the midst of prayer and prayerful reading of Scripture not only comfort and guide us, they also enable us to be able to comfort and guide others as we have been. The old fashioned word for this is testimony, sharing with others what God through Jesus Christ by the powerful working of the Holy Spirit has done for you.

My brother-in-law is a minister of a non-denominational church and that makes them a bit freer to do things differently. On Sunday mornings, he only gives a twenty or so minute sermon and then opens up the pulpit for people to come up and share what the Lord had done in their lives that week. That part of the sermon can go on for quite some time and truly, either there's a bunch of deluded religious fanatics there or Jesus Christ truly is alive and working in the midst of and through his people to bring real salvation in the present, things that will last into the day when all things are made new. Sharing our lives in Christ is where a strong passion for Christ in a congregation begins to grow.

The sharing of testimony is the heart of Christian education, yet there is also a more formal side to education in the church involving those whom God has spiritually gifted to teach. It is the work of these teachers to proclaim and

explain who Jesus is as the Son of Man just as Jesus himself did to his disciples. This means teaching God the Son was born human, lived, suffered, died, was raised, and ascended to sit at the right hand of the father until he returns and the implications that has for us now as by him God has reconciled us to himself. The reason why he did this was not simply to inspire or require us to be good people; though Jesus should be the role model that inspires us and indeed we are required to do the good which means live as he lived. Jesus, the Son of Man, did what he did to rescue not just humans but the entirety of God's good Creation from the evil corruption we call sin and death that the Fall of humanity brought upon it. At present, God is making that salvation, that redemption, that victory that Jesus wrought known through us, the disciples of Jesus Christ, as we respond in faith by picking up our crosses, denying ourselves, and walking in faithful faith into the good works, the Creation redeeming works, that God has had planned for us to do from before the beginning of all things. These good works God calls us to do are preparing works, works by which God prepares this corrupted Creation for the day on which he makes all things new.

Teachers teach the people of the church that our lives are now hidden with Christ in God and when Christ, who is our life is revealed, then we also will be revealed with him in glory. Teachers explain how it is that we are part of what God is doing to save this world from the evil, Sin, and Death that has such a terrible hold on this world. The purpose of Christian education in the church is not to help us individuals be all that we can be but rather to help us be who the LORD God is making us to be in Jesus Christ by the powerful working of the Holy Spirit so that he may work to redeem, to save, to heal his Creation through us. A simple example of this is when we go to Evangel Hall and serve supper and sit at table with those children of God and then worship with the few that stay around. Through the very act of our talking and listening to them Jesus himself comes and extends dignity to them and proclaims his care. In those moments New Creation is coming into being and will remain until all things are made new. Amen.